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Local leaders talk energy in Washington

Business, civic figures discuss concerns with members of Congress

By Doug Abrahms
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WASHINGTON -- About 40 business and civic leaders from the Greenville area heard lots of talk about energy on their trip to Washington this week, but they were told not to expect a lot of action this year.

"Energy costs are hurting our employment rate," said John DeWorken, vice president of the Greenville Chamber of Commerce.

The group -- which included John Stockwell, chancellor of the University of South Carolina Upstate, and Greenville County Councilman Jim Burns -- listened to several talks about energy proposals that seek to lower gasoline prices.

Unfortunately, don't expect Congress to do much about energy this year, Rep. Gresham Barrett, R-Westminster, told the group. The House Democratic leadership is offering a very narrow bill that won't be open to a full debate on energy, he said.

Barrett said later in an interview that he didn't know whether he would vote for a Democratic House proposal to open most U.S. coastal waters to drilling that is expected to come to the floor next week. He said he hasn't seen the details.

"All we're saying is bring an open and honest debate to the (House) floor," he said. "It's got to use every tool in the toolbox."

Rep. Bob Inglis, R-Travelers Rest, said he supports proposals to open up U.S. coasts to more oil and gas drilling but that further steps need to be taken to address energy issues.

The Senate is likely to take up a separate energy bill next week, but few expect comprehensive energy legislation to pass in the few remaining weeks of Congress leading up to the Nov. 4 elections.

Apart from energy, Greenville-area businesses are worried about rising health-care costs, national security and economic development issues, DeWorken said. Put together by the Greenville, Spartanburg and Greer chambers of commerce, the group visits Washington every other year.

"This is important for us because we bring what's important to the Upstate to Washington," DeWorken said.

The trip also allowed local leaders to address specific regional projects.

Greenville Mayor Knox White spoke with South Carolina Sens. Jim DeMint and Lindsey Graham about pushing the General Services Administration to decide which of three sites should house the new federal courthouse in Greenville.

"It is disrupting our downtown development," White said. "So we need a decision made."

The region also is studying building a rail or bus link between downtown Greenville and Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research. The area hopes to get federal funding for a large portion of the project, White said.
